**Journal of the Short Story in English**
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

**36 | Spring 2001**
**Varia**

# Preferring not to:The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's "Bartleby"

**Jane Desmarais**

**Electronic version**
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/575
ISSN: 1969-6108

**Publisher**
Presses universitaires d'Angers

**Printed version**
Date of publication: 1 March 2001
Number of pages: 25-39
ISSN: 0294-04442

**Electronic reference**
Jane Desmarais, « Preferring not to:The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's "Bartleby" », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 36 | Spring 2001, Online since 29 September 2008, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/575

# *Preferring not to:The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's "Bartleby"*[1]

Jane Desmarais

"I would prefer not to."
"You *will* not?"
"I *prefer* not."

1 "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) is a story of passive resistance. And as the narrator is forced to admit, "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance." Refusing to kow-tow to the demands of his employer, and working to his own individual rule, Bartleby represents a challenge to capitalist, corporatist ideologies. He declines to do what is asked of him over and above the basic task of copying documents. He is an unostentatious figure, "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn", who works "silently, palely, mechanically", but he exercises enormous power by refusing to comply with simple and undemanding requests. On the third day of being installed in a legal office in Wall Street, he is asked by his boss to examine a paper with him, but "without moving from his privacy", he replies "I would prefer not to". Towards the end of the story, he is discovered occupying the office at weekends. Bartleby's verbal obstruction becomes physical.

2 The phrase "prefer not to", or what Gilles Deleuze has called the "Formula",[2] recurs throughout the story and its repetition drives Bartleby's colleagues to combative fury. In their simplicity and politeness, these five words -"I would prefer not to"- and the use of the verb "prefer" most notably - achieve a paradoxical significance within the narrative. The statement juxtaposes a conditional with a negative sense, and this lends the reply its force. On the one hand, Bartleby refuses politely, using the conditional form "would" suggesting that there might be a choice in the matter. On the other hand, this choice and therefore expression of politeness is an illusion, for Bartleby blatantly refuses to do anything asked of him. What we witness in the story is a form of resistance based on the

paradox of appearing to yield while yielding not at all.[3] Bartleby's politeness is browbeatingly powerful, disarming both the reader and the narrator. How could one fault such a genteel reply? Even when challenged "You *will* not?" Bartleby counters with a quiet "I *prefer* not." Like the semblance of choice in his response, "prefer" is both illusive and allusive. Unspecific in what it refers to, the word alludes to a choice which it denies. The implicit suggestion that there might be something Bartleby would prefer to do is an illusion. The use of the word, "prefer", then, appears contradictory and strikes an ambiguous note in the story. A comparative verb is articulated by Bartleby as an absolute. The narrator declares that he is "More a man of preferences than assumptions", but Bartleby effectively turns the expression of preference into a statement which has the force of an assumption. This small verbal paradox is just one of a whole set of tensions which shape the narrative.[4]

3 Bartleby's loss of appetite and his increasingly pallid and deathly demeanour offer valuable clues to our understanding of his character. Bartleby does not like change. "I would prefer not to make any change" he says, and a little later states "I like to be stationary". In fact, he prefers not to go very far at all, working, eating, sleeping all in the same place. He is unable to move out of his private world and make public aspects of himself. He copies documents, but refuses to *compare* them for that would mean working *with* someone, and his aim is to remain autonomous and self-contained. This neurotic behaviour is underlined by Bartleby's anorexic characteristics. Ultimately he refuses to *take in* any nourishment, but this is prefigured in the text by his refusing to *take on* more work.

4 Melville uses the metaphors of eating and digestion repeatedly. Before Bartleby's arrival we are apprised of the alimentary economy of the law office. The work habits of Turkey, whose "clothes were apt to look oily, and smell of eating houses" complement those of his colleague, Nippers, whose "brandylike disposition" rendered him irritable for a morning's work. In spite of these idiosyncracies, they perform their roles "like guards". The lawyer-narrator informs us that he "never had to do with their eccentricities at one time.... When Nippers'[fit] was on, Turkey's was off; and vice versa." Bartleby disrupts this economy. When he arrives at the office he appears to be breaking some kind of fast:

> At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion.

5 He nourishes himself on paperwork to such an extent that he becomes identified with the document copies, and we might consider the ambiguity in the statement, "I like to be stationary". Bartleby is and is not what he eats. He feeds on documents and is "stationery", but in general he eats very little. It is not surprising that the narrator observes "he never went out to dinner". Bartleby survives on handfuls of gingernuts which are then consumed alone. The spicy biscuits have no effect on Bartleby's mild nature and passivity, unlike the Englishman, Turkey, whose feisty, aggressive behaviour after a liquid lunch stands in contrast to his subdued efforts in the morning. The contrast between Bartleby's self-denial and the epicureanism of the other characters, whose behaviour is influenced by what they eat and drink, is made explicit. The "energetic", "noisy" insolence of Turkey is induced by his noonday tipple, while Nippers, afflicted by the "two evil powers" of "ambition and indigestion", is calmed after a good lunch.[5] The twelve-year-old Ginger Nut nibbles throughout the day and one of his duties is as "cake and apple purveyor" for the other clerks. The word play (stationary/stationery), verbal

repetition (gingernut/Ginger Nut) and references to food which cannot be eaten (Turkey), without implications of the ultimate taboo, cannibalism, create a kind of linguistic indigestion at this point in the story, which worsens as Bartleby repeats his refusal, "I would prefer not to". The phrase is, we might say, regurgitated, burped, repeated, in the text, and this calls to mind the impossibility of digestion and satiation for Bartleby. He refuses, in effect, to be fed, except insofar as he feeds (on) himself.

6 In the course of the story Bartleby concedes a few biscuits and a morsel of cheese, and accordingly expends little energy. Repeatedly he is described as "motionless", "sedate" and "still". This reliable serenity is described at one point as an attractive feature, but the narrator becomes only temporarily "reconciled" to Bartleby's "unalterableness of demeanour". By refusing to move, take on more work and take in more food, Bartleby achieves an ascetic purity, and this is borne out by significant references to his "hermitage", a place of silence and solitude for him. By the end of the story, the constant refusals wear everyone down. Locked away in prison, Bartleby refuses to eat:

> 'I prefer not to dine today,' said Bartleby, turning away. 'It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners'. So saying, he slowly moved to the other side of the enclosure and took up a position fronting the dead-wall.

7 This is portentous, for the man who "lives without dining", gives up living. Even in death -the ultimate defence- Bartleby is mild and courteous. He politely refuses to eat, and simply so to live. Curled up, foetus-fashion, he becomes identified with the object against which his head rests -the prison wall. We are prepared for this early on by references to his pallid complexion, his withdrawal from social life and refusal to take anything- food, money and even the offer of human empathy. The emptiness of Bartleby's life is alluded to in the paradoxical references to Egypt. There might be a regal dignity to Bartleby's last moments, but unlike Egyptian kings, he is buried without sustenance for the afterlife, but this is appropriate since he is a man without power, appetite or desire.

8 Bartleby's disengagement from life is not presented as disagreeable. Indeed, his exit is quiet and contained. For the time he survives he does so on nothing. He makes no demands, and is constantly in the position of reaction. Bartleby does not revolt in terms of a physical attack, but through a repeated set of verbal refusals, he achieves the effect of revolt. In anorexic style, he is able to live while taking no nourishment, either physical or spiritual. His is a quiet battle, concerned less with attack than defence.[6] He might be a small component in the relentless law machine of Wall Street, but he brings significance and power to his position as a copyist in the office. The small man in his small way interferes with processes which are repetitive and uncreative.

9 An absent figure in so many ways (he says little, does little, *is* little), Bartleby has a powerful presence, and we are astonished, I think, at how so slight a character can represent, in F.O. Matthiessen's words, "a tragedy of utter negation" (493). The haunting reality of Bartleby's situation is real enough, and his increasing isolation combined with his determination not to comply creates the most intriguing and perplexing psychological profile of passive resistance in nineteenth-century literary history. In 1978, Q.D. Leavis, declared of "Bartleby" that in spite of "plenty of critical attention... there is no disagreement as to its meaning and the nature of its techniques... present no difficulty" (199). This characteristically dogmatic view is not only outmoded, but is demonstrably inaccurate. The proliferation of critical readings of "Bartleby" testify to the story's complexity and significance. Some critics, like Morris Beja, have warned against an "either/or approach", but the tendency has been to view the story as either a socio-

economic parable or a psychological study. This probably accounts for why much of the critical work on "Bartleby" is disappointing. Some readings overemphasise aspects or elements of the story at the expense of others. In 1962, when the psycho-critics were refining their notions of doppelgangers and split selves, Marvin Felheim, in an article in *College English*, tried to categorise the various treatments of the story. His categories were not helpful, but his project highlighted two readings of the story that were particularly popular.

10 The first, political, reading locates the story within the context of America's capitalist expansion. Bartleby refuses to accept the structures imposed on him by a modernising world interested more in collective strategies and "Yes" men than the individual seeking to live outside mainstream ideals. The lawyer-narrator's chambers become, so to speak, Everyoffice. Bartleby becomes the archetypal clerk, a figure bowed to his task and of whom it is demanded absolute compliance and reliability. His preference "not to" becomes the insistent and impeccable articulation of resistance in the wilderness called Modern America. He fights by refusing to fight and so he has become an icon for various Peace Movements in the twentieth century. Thus "Bartleby" is an allegory of modern America and the failure of democracy to preserve the individual's right and freedom to choose. It is a story about the failure of modern social life. It is also the story of political unrootedness, of the consequences of living in a society operating at an alienatingly high level of production and consumption.

11 It is not surprising that many critics sought to locate the source of this political reading in the writings of H.D. Thoreau. As Michael Paul Rogin comments in *Subversive Genealogy*, although Bartleby's "I prefer not to" is an echo of Thoreau's "I simply wish to refuse allegiance, to withdraw", it is not a straightforward debt to the author of *Walden*. Rather, Melville's tale inverts Thoreau's notion of passive resistance. Thoreau went to jail for not paying his poll-tax (because it contributed to slavery), but unlike Bartleby whose sense of self is dramatically reduced by confinement, Thoreau felt that to be physically immured was not to lose his sense of personal civic liberty:

> I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar.

12 In Thoreau's confinement, he retains the idea that he is "free", and he goes on to say that imprisonment is a mere physical restriction. He insists that a part of him cannot be imprisoned and this resistance has no cost because it is not part of the civil or political domain. Confinement in his view does not inhibit a man's sense of his own intellectual or moral worth. "I was not born to be forced", Thoreau insists, "I will breathe after my own fashion." His sacrifice is never more than partial because his virtue has only to be civic or public. In fact, his psychological freedom could even be thought of having been enhanced by his corporeal imprisonment. This is not the case for Bartleby, however, whose sacrifice is so much the greater because these binary divisions are abandoned. After Bartleby is en-Tombed,[7] his withdrawal is severe, and this leads to his self-destruction. This is paradoxical and inverts the whole notion of defence which is to keep out the dangerous object: "Hence what was designed in the first instance as a guard or barrier to prevent disruptive impingement on the self, can become the walls of a prison from which the self cannot escape" (Laing 150). At the end of the story Bartleby walls himself out of his own life, and he thereby destroys himself while conserving others. The denial of others, for Bartleby, necessarily involves self-denial and withdrawal, and the punishment of himself.

This takes us a long way from the political ideal of passive resistance, behind which the idea is to "save the adversary as well as to triumph over him" (Rogin 195), and brings us closer to a psychological reading.

13 The psychological reading presents a more disturbing view. Bartleby's lifelessness is both the product and outcome of a sterile bureaucracy which as an external reality has little to do with the natural impulses and desires of the individual. This reading offers an image of neurotic vulnerability. Such is the incurable isolation of individuals whose personal histories are lost in and to the System. Desks and chairs may be repositioned and partition doors may fold down, but there is little change or hope for the individual like Bartleby whose internally-constructed walls are more impermeable than any person can understand. His elegant and economical "I would prefer not to" becomes the mantra of the dispossessed and unlocated. It becomes another wall between him and external reality.

14 Both readings have their merits, but are often presented as mutually exclusive; whereas the political-allegorical reading hails Bartleby as a hero, the psychological spin demonstrates the ways in which he fails. Might there be a way of transcending the distinction between a political and a psychological reading? Might there be an alternative, paradoxical, reading of the text, which puts the psychology at the heart of the politics rather than treating them as discrete? The language of anorexia is helpful here, because, as an illness with which we are becoming increasingly familiar, that condition operates extremely successfully as a form of resistance. The nature of the resistance, however, is paradoxical and tragic. In many cases, as in Bartleby's, it is withdrawal *in extremis*, a slow suicide. By keeping everything and everyone out, the anorexic is able to achieve a state of ascetic purity, but this purity leads ultimately to death and is quite literally short-lived. When Bartleby is at his most resistant, the office becomes his "hermitage". He changes working space into a space of retreat, as he does with his own inner life. As many studies show, anorexics prefer to retreat from social life and seek out places of silence and solitude, where they are able to regulate meagre meals and live on virtually nothing. This is how the narrator describes Bartleby's routine. The paradoxical nature of anorexic behaviour, the diligence and energy involved in not eating, in not consuming, in not complying, is also represented in Melville's text by character of Bartleby and his recurring phrase, "I would prefer not to". As I explained earlier, the force of this refusal derives from the way in which the comparative statement is turned into an absolute. At a social and political level, this mode of resistance is highly effective, and capable of undermining oppressive governments and military regimes. When adopted by the individual, the consequences can be self-destructive. Melville offers both possible outcomes in "Bartleby" and by so doing reveals the contingent nature of the distinction between private and public realms and thus of denial.

15 It would be a mistake to treat Bartleby as a case study of anorexia, as it has been to see him simply as a schizophrenic with various compulsion neuroses. Although some early critics have identified Bartleby with Melville himself (Mumford 238), Bartleby is a literary construct, and provides only an abstract version of a psychological case study. However, the paradoxical condition of anorexia is a useful model in analysing the complexity of Melville's characterisation, and is suggested by the metaphors of feasting and fasting, the recurring statement "I would prefer not to", and also by what Leo Marx has called the "controlling symbols of the story": the walls.

16 In his study of the relationship between Melville's politics and art, Rogin makes reference to the various walls in the text. He describes the way in which Bartleby is confined in his work, screened and "bounded" by a "white wall" at one end and a "lofty brick wall" at the other, and the way in which he withdraws to "dead-wall reveries" when he is sick of copying. And Wall Street, of course, provides the appropriate backdrop. More concerned with the political resonances of Bartleby's character for Melville, Rogin merely alludes to the psychological significance of these walls. He refers to them in the mode of leitmotifs, as boundaries, partitions, parameters, which create the idea of isolation and the breakdown of "rooted relationships" (194). Bartleby, according to Rogin, is a cog in the political machine; he is "Tocqueville's democratic individual, cut off from family, class, and community" (196). This is a useful reading but it does not take into account the screen and the walls *within* walls which constitute Bartleby's paradoxical and tragic condition.

17 A wall is defined as a structure which defends, holds back, fortifies, encloses, and by its very nature, separates and divides. In "Bartleby", there are two kinds of wall: the physical boundaries of Wall Street, the law offices and the internal partitions, and the psychological walls which Bartleby erects in order to defend himself from entreaties to change. He says to the lawyer-narrator, "I like to be stationary. But I am not particular".[8] As long as he can stay in one place, he is content and quite literally "contained". The walls which surround him give him a sense of place if not identity, and there is a certain security in this. These external and inner walls are of course interrelated. Bartleby's physical environment metaphorically figures his psychological barricades. The lawyer's office is a walled block surrounded by walls. At one end there is light afforded by a "spacious skylight shaft"; at the other, there is the "everlasting shade" of a "lofty brick wall, black by age... which... required no spyglass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all nearsighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my windowpanes." The narrator adds, "the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern." Bartleby's working space is further defined by a wall three feet away and a "high green folding screen" which demarcates his space from that of his boss: "And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined." Bartleby's space therefore is rather like a series of boxes placed one inside the other, the smallest box being the internal walled area within Bartleby himself, which keeps others out and keeps him inside. This is most powerfully conveyed when he refuses to admit the lawyer to his own offices, thus displacing and reducing him to walking "around the block two or three times". The complexity of this situation surely recalls Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience" and the idea that the psychological part of man cannot be imprisoned because it is not part of the civil or political domain.

18 It is interesting that the serialised version of the story first appeared in *Putnam's Magazine* in two parts. Part One ends with the lawyer's decision to try and cope with the scrivener's announcement that he has given up copying. Part Two opens with a role reversal. Bartleby is inside the office; the lawyer-narrator is refused entry. The ec-centric Bartleby occupies the central space and his patron is forced to find alternative accommodation. Part One treats the themes of displacement and social alienation whereas Part Two focuses more on the notions of self-alienation and self-division, from which both Bartleby and the lawyer suffer.[9] We might remind ourselves here of R.D. Laing's 1959 existentialist study, *The Divided Self*, which, as Morris Beja has noted, is highly suggestive in reading Melville. In Laingian terms, Bartleby and the lawyer are divided selves. They are "cut off

from others and from the world, but also self-divided, dissociated" (Beja 559). Bartleby's self-dissociation, however, has damaging consequences. He becomes "petrified". He turns from an alive person into a dead thing, into a stone, or wall. Laing describes this as the schizoid's adoption of various paradoxical forms of self-protection, and terms it "petrification":

> If the whole of the individual's being cannot be defended, the individual retracts his lines of defence until he withdraws within a central citadel. He is prepared to write off everything he is, except his "self". But the tragic paradox is that the more the self is defended in this way, the more it is destroyed (80-1).

19 As Laing remarks this can be a strategy adopted by all types of person, not just the "unembodied" schizoid personality, and in Melville's story the line between sanity and madness is shown to be thin. "Normal" behaviour is behaviour which fits in with the majority view. Those, like Bartleby, who do not measure up, are "*luny*" and "deranged", and their defence becomes one of self-ostracisation and petrification.

20 While Laing's work provides real insight into the "unembodied" character of the scrivener, recent psychoanalytical studies of eating disorders (such as bulimia and anorexia) provide a more sophisticated psychological model.[10] Some research, most notably, that of L.K.G. Hus, E.S. Meltzer and A.H. Crisp, bridges understanding of the disorders of schizophrenia and anorexia nervosa[11] and, more recently, Gianna Williams' model of a "No Entry" system of defences, developed from the theories of Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, provides a way of understanding the character of Bartleby and his series of refusals. In her book, *Internal Landscapes and Foreign Bodies* (1997), she touches on "a range of feeding difficulties or eating disorders which may be seen as further facets of the pathology associated with impairments in 'taking from another'" (11). Drawing on the lives of "patients who protect themselves from the experience of an inimical input" (12), Williams describes the ways in which keeping everyone and everything out becomes paramount for the anorexic/bulimic in particular:

> I think it becomes clear ... that the relinquishment of defences against forming a dependent relationship on a human being, free to come and go ... represents a shift especially in the area of eating disorders, from valuing possessions to valuing a different aspect in one's quality of life. It could probably be most concisely defined as a transition from lending value to *having*, to finding greater fulfilment in the more painful but richer predicament of *being* (13-14).

21 Bartleby does not make this transition, because he cannot move beyond a state of self-denial. In order to *be* he would have to dissolve some of the boundaries and walls and admit (in both senses of the word) assistance (and existence). He is concerned most of all to protect himself from invasion. His invasion anxieties are not circumscribed, but manifest themselves variously as refusals to take food in, to take work on, to admit the need of help, and to allow others access (into either a physical or psychological space). Most pertinently in the story they manifest themselves as refusals of nourishment. In Williams' terms, these refusals constitute a "no-entry" syndrome which "performs the defensive function of blocking access to any input experienced as potentially intrusive and persecutory" (121). Bartleby constructs a chinese box of walls, and, paradoxically, this is both a gesture towards life *and* death.

22 This "no-entry" syndrome is psychological stoicism and we should recall by way of conclusion Melville's references to Cicero - a re-presentation of reason, eloquence and stoicism. We encounter the bust first of all through the eyes of the lawyer-narrator, who remarks that "doubtless I should have violently dismissed him [Bartleby] from the

premises. But as it was I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero out of doors." A little later on, Bartleby fixates on the head. He declares that he preferred not to examine the fourth quadruplicate, but instead "kept his glance fixed upon [the] bust of Cicero". Through the suggestive double appearance of the bust in the text, Melville is able to adopt into "Bartleby" both the political and psychological notions of stoicism, which becomes a way, as I hope to have shown, of setting up the problem of Bartleby's retreat from the public world and his self-denial. Using political thought as well as psychology in our reading of the text allows us to overcome the dichotomy in the critical literature. In the end, because the story of Bartleby is a "tragic paradox" in psychological terms it must be a "tragic paradox" in political terms. Bartleby's freedoms are incompatible with life.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beja, Morris, "Bartleby and Schizophrenia", *Massachusetts Review*, 19 (Autumn 1978), 558-68.

Deleuze, Gilles, "Bartleby; Or, The Formula." In *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. London and New York: Verso, 1998.

Farrell, E.M., *Lost for Words: The Psychoanalysis of Anorexia and Bulimia.* London: Process Press, 1995.

Felheim, Marvin, "Meaning and Structure in 'Bartleby'", *College English*, 23 (February 1962), 369-76.

Hardwick, Elizabeth, *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1962.

L.K.G. Hus, E.S. Meltzer and A.H. Crisp, "Schizophrenia and Anorexia Nervosa", *Transactions of the Clinical Society* (London), 7 (1974?), 22.

----------, "Schizophrenia and Anorexia Nervosa", *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, 169 (1981), 273-6.

Jaworski, Philippe, *Melville, le désert et l'empire.* Paris: Presses de l'Ecole Normale, 1986.

Keppler, C.F., *The Literature of the Second Self*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972.

Laing, R.D., *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness.* London: Tavistock Publications, 1959.

Lawrence, Marilyn, *The Anorexic Experience*. London: The Women's Press, 1995.

Leavis, Q.D., "Melville: The 1853-6 Phase". In Faith Pullin, ed., *New Perspectives on Melville*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1978.

Mordecai Marcus, "Melville's Bartleby as a Psychological Double", *College English*, 23 (February 1962), 365-8

Marx, Leo, "Melville's Parable of the Walls", *Sewanee Review*, 61 (Autumn 1953), 602-27.

Matthiessen, F.O., *American Renaissance.* London, Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1941.

Mumford, Lewis, *Herman Melville. A Study of his life and vision*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929.

Perry, Dennis R., "'Ah, Humanity': Compulsion Neuroses in Melville's 'Bartleby'", *Studies in Short Fiction*, 24 (Autumn 1987), 407-15.

Phillips, Adam, "On Eating, and Preferring Not To". In *Promises, Promises*. London: Faber, 2000.

Ripa de Meana, Gabriella, *Figures of Lightness: Anorexia, Bulimia and Psychoanalysis*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999.

Rogers, Robert, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970.

Rogin, Michael Paul, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

Thoreau, H.D., "Civil Disobedience" (1848).

Widmer, Kingsley, *The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Herman Melville's Short Novels.* Los Angeles: California State Colleges, 1970.

Williams, Gianna, *Internal Landscapes and Foreign Bodies*. London: Duckworth, 1997.

----------, "Reflections on some dynamics of eating disorders: 'No Entry' defences and foreign bodies", *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 78 (October 1997), 927-41.

## NOTES

**1.** My thanks to Michael Brearley, Joseph Holt, Matthew Pountney and John Shaw for helping to shape my own dead-wall reveries.

**2.** Deleuze uses this term in "Bartleby; Or, The Formula", in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, which was first published in 1993, and brings together his essays on a variety of writers and philosophers. To "Bartleby", as to the other essays, Deleuze adopts a 'symptomatological' approach, diagnosing the ways in which language, pushed to and beyond its own limits, represents the process of life itself. He writes:

The formula bourgeons and proliferates. At each occurrence, there is a stupor surrounding Bartleby, as if one had heard the Unspeakable or the Unstoppable. And there is Bartleby's silence, as if he had said everything and exhausted language at the same time. With each instance, one has the impression that the madness is growing: not Bartleby's madness in "particular", but the madness around him, notably that of the attorney, who launches into strange propositions and even stranger behaviours.

**3.** The affirmative and negative nature of Bartleby's "preferring not to" has been noted by Jaworski: Bartleby "does not refuse, but neither does he accept, he advances and then withdraws into this advance, barely exposing himself in a nimble retreat from speech" (19).

**4.** Apart from Deleuze no critic has bothered to unpack this statement. In *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*, Elizabeth Hardwick writes tentatively: "I do not think he has chosen the verb 'prefer' in some emblematic way. That is his language and his language is what he is. Prefer has its power, however" (224). With which last sentiment I concur. The phrase is mobilised by the other characters too, who, described by the lawyer-narrator as having "got the word", involuntarily "roll it from their tongues" [p.20].

**5.** Epicureanism involves an appreciation of the centrality of pleasure, especially consumption, for the good life. Acknowledging this in the story gives Nippers and Turkey (and by extension Ginger Nut and the grubman), a philosophical meaning of their own. Are they epicureans, or, do

they reveal the problems encountered by the other side of the argument? Whatever, epicureanism does have the virtue of making food a necessary element in the story rather than the metaphorical object of denial in the narrow political reading. That is, seeing stoicism in dialogue with epicureanism makes food the necessary dramatic heart of a broader reading since epicureanism necessarily emphasises consumption.

**6.** Deleuze describes the quiet, dignified, "agrammatical" Bartleby as a modern Messiah: "A schizophrenic vocation: even in his catatonic or anorexic state, Bartleby is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the Medicine-Man, the new Christ or the brother to us all" (90).

**7.** The "Tombs" are the so-called Hall of Justice in downtown Manhattan used mainly as a prison.

**8.** This is part of the same lexical paradox as "prefer" for he is not "particular" as long as he gets what he wants.

**9.** See, for example, the literature on "doubling" in Melville: Marcus, "Melville's Bartleby as a Psychological Double" 365-8; Widmer pp.112f.; Rogers pp.67-70; Keppler pp.115-20.

**10.** Two recent and particularly useful studies are Farrell (1995) and Lawrence (1995).

**11.** See the work of Hus, Meltzer and Crisp.

## AUTHORS

### JANE DESMARAIS

Jane Desmarais teaches literature and art history at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is currently writing *A Cultural History of Decadence* for Polity Press.